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Women, Land and Gender Relations in Negeri Sembilan: Some Preliminary Findings

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I Introduction

This paper is an attempt to examine the nature of female land holdings in the matrilineal Adat Perpatih society in Negeri Sembilan and the implications of such holdings on male-female relationship within the household/family unit and the lineage group. The paper is based on fieldwork[1] carried out by the writer throughout the months of October, November and December 1986 in Mukim of Seri Menanti, in the Kuala Pilah district, and draws heavily from the writer's own experience as a member of and living in an *adat* community until the early 1960s.

The writer has elsewhere [Azizah Kassim 1970] established that gender relations in Adat Perpatih society are tilted in favour of women: they control the means of subsistence production, especially rice fields and orchards, as well as homestead lands, which are ancestral property (*tanah pusaka adat*). That was when the matrilineal society was dependent on a peasant economy. It is now more than sixteen years since the writer's previous fieldwork in Seri Menanti and since then a number of changes have taken place. Of these the most relevant as far as women's role is concerned are the spread of education and the shift in the economic base of Adat Perpatih society. The peasant economy, which was dependent on rice cultivation and rubber tapping, has given way to one heavily dependent on wage employment and remittance from urban areas. This shift affected the use, and in many cases led to disuse, of ancestral land, especially rice fields. Dependence on ancestral land thus declined, and the economic value of this land also fell. If gender relations are influenced by women's control over means of production, how does this new phenomenon affect their position vis-a-vis men? This is the main problem addressed in this paper.

The fieldwork for this paper was carried out in ten traditional[2] villages (*kampung*):[3]

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1) The fieldwork was funded by the Universiti Malaya through its Vote F Research fund, and conducted with the help of two research assistants.

2) The term "traditional villages" is used here to differentiate them from newly formed villages or *kampung baharu*, which are found in rural Negeri Sembilan and elsewhere in Peninsular Malaysia, and from squatter villages which are found in some urban settings.

3) Kampung in Malay is abbreviated as "kg.," which form will be used hereafter.

Kg. Tanjung Sepam, Kg. Bukit Lintang, Kg. Mertang, Kg. Merual, Kg. Padang Biawas, Kg. Umor, Kg. Seri Menanti, Kg. Galau, Kg. Buyau and Kg. Sungai Layang. Six of these were the site of the writer's previous fieldwork in 1969. Administratively, these villages come under five separate Village Development and Security Committees (*Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung*, known in short as JKKK), i.e., the JKKK of Kg. Merual, Kg. Seri Menanti, Kg. Pulau, Kg. Buyau and Kg. Mertang, with a total of 598 households and a population of 2,357 (see Section III). Two hundred households were interviewed, accounting for 33.4 percent of the total population of the villages concerned. As the focus of study is women, the questionnaires were addressed to the housewives. However, discussions were also held with the menfolk to cross-check the women's information and to find out their views of male-female relationships in society.

II Studies on Women in Adat Perpatih Society in Negeri Sembilan

Adat Perpatih society with its matrilineal social organization has been extensively studied and written about, as evidenced by the impressive list of publications on it compiled recently [Tunku Noraidah T. A. Rahman 1984: 22-34]. The list is by no means complete. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the consistent interest of many in studying Adat Perpatih society over the last eight decades or so. Academics of various inclinations and laymen alike have all contributed to the wide range of publications now available, touching on different aspects of the Adat and its people. Much of the writing points to the importance of women within the matrilineal society: they ensure its perpetuity, and to them is entrusted the ancestral land, the anchor of the (traditional) Adat Perpatih economy and polity. Despite women's central position within the adat ideology and social organization, few writers have ventured to examine the adat from female perspectives and study women's status in the matrilineal context. To date, works on women in Adat Perpatih society are few and far between. Perhaps among the first to make a passing reference to women in Negeri Sembilan was M. G. Swift [1963: 267-286] in a brief paper on men and women in Malay society. Since then few have followed his footsteps. Apart from my own work on the position of women in the district of Kuala Pilah [Azizah Kassim 1970; 1974: 69-72; 1976: 41-57; 1985: 44-53; 1986: 1-8] others who have dealt with the same topic at some length are Asis Ujang [1975], Maila Stivens [1981, n.d., 1985] and M. G. Peletz [1987]. Stivens and Peletz did their fieldwork in the district of Rembau. Stivens concerns herself with female autonomy and women's land rights in the midst of capitalist development and agrarian change, while Peletz deals with female heirship and autonomy. Asis Ujang, who did his fieldwork in Kampung Terusan, Kuala Pilah, examined the position of women from two perspectives: the Adat Perpatih and Islam.

If work on Adat Perpatih women is relatively lacking, it is because women's studies itself is something new, which began to gain momentum in the United States and

Europe only in the 1970s. In Malaysia, too, women's studies began to take off only in the last decade. Much of the existing literature remained unpublished, and much of that which was published deals with women in relation to urbanization and industrialization. It is the women in the formal economic sector, namely, the factory workers, their migration process and their adaptation problem in the urban context which have been the major focus of study, and significantly, these studies have been done by women themselves. Interest in the study of rural women (including those in the estates) began to take shape only in the late 1970s and 1980s.[4] There is evidently a dearth of serious work on rural women in Malaysia, especially from anthropological perspectives, and it is hoped that this study will go some way to overcoming this shortcoming.

III Seri Menanti and Its People: A Profile

The mukim (sub-district) of Seri Menanti is the traditional seat of the royal household of Negeri Sembilan. Situated in the south central part of the state, it occupies a valley fed by the now silting Muar river. This mukim and ten others together form the Kuala Pilah district (*daerah*); and Kuala Pilah, along with the districts of Rembau, Jelebu, Jempul, Seremban, Port Dickson and Tampin, constitutes the state of Negeri Sembilan.

Seri Menanti covers an area of 7,769.971 hectares, on which are scattered about sixty traditional villages of various sizes. Some of these villages are too small (with twenty to thirty households, for example) to be officially recognized. For administrative purposes, the District Office groups together several small adjoining villages and regards them as one, referring to them by the name of the largest village in the grouping. A good example is one of the villages under study, Kg. Merual. As far as the Kuala Pilah District office is concerned, Kg. Merual is an administrative unit, albeit the smallest one in the state administrative hierarchy, with a *ketua kampung* (village head). Kg. Merual as an administrative unit comprises four villages, Kg. Merual, Kg. Bukit Lintang, Kg. Umor and Kg. Sungai Layang; and as far as the inhabitants of these kampung are concerned, their villages are distinct from one other, each with a definite boundary, and its own separate community.

The administrative centre of Seri Menanti is a small petty trading centre known locally as *pekan*, i.e., Pekan Seri Menanti, where the home (*istana*) of the royal household is located. In the pre-independence period, this royal enclave was no more than a new istana built in the 1920s, two rows of dilapidated wooden shophouses with thatched roofs, a clinic (known then as "dispensary" by the locals), a mosque, a police depot attached to the istana, two primary schools (one Malay medium and the other English), an old wooden istana built in the eighteenth century and a couple of brick houses belonging to members of the royal family. There was no electricity,

4) For a comprehensive account of works on women in Malaysia, see Fan Kok Sim [1984: 234-312] and Jamilah Ariffin [1984: 93-100].

no piped water supply, and no telephones, except in the clinic, police post and the royal households.

The post-independence period saw much physical development in the mukim. All old buildings in the area except for the two istana have been demolished and new ones built in their stead. The Pekan Seri Menanti now comprises two rows of newly built shophouses, two schools (one primary, one secondary), a post office, a community hall, a health centre, a mosque and a royal golf course. Piped water and electricity are available, along with public and private telephones.

In areas outside the Pekan Seri Menanti, some of the facilities mentioned above are also available on a lesser scale. Most villages have their own community hall, a surau or a mosque or both; and there are also small health centres and rural clinics in three other places, Tanjung Ipoh, Kg. Tengah and Gunong Pasir, which are also petty trading centres. Piped water and electricity have been introduced gradually since the 1960s, so that by 1986, 90 percent of the population have access to electricity and 85 percent to piped water. A main road, which in the pre-independence days was a narrow dirt track and which since the 1960s has been enlarged and paved, runs across the mukim, thus providing easy access to most of the villages. A public bus serves the area, but its unreliability has induced many to purchase their own mode of transport, of which bicycles, motorcycles and cars are the most popular.

Seri Menanti has a population of 5,474 in 1,388 households (1986). Most (98 percent) of them are Malays, with a sprinkling of Chinese and Indians. The latter two ethnic categories are confined to the pekan, especially Seri Menanti and Tanjung Ipoh, and are involved mainly in business, while the former dominate the villages. The Malays trace their origin to Minangkabau migrants who came to the area in the eighteenth century, and it is to this ancestory that they owe their matrilineal kinship organization: the Adat Perpatih. The adat, which is still practised today, has undergone considerable changes; but there are some basic principles which have remained constant. These are:

a) Division of Adat Perpatih society into twelve matriclans, the *suku*, with each clan headed by a *lembaga*. The clan is further divided into lineages called *perut*, and each perut (maximum lineage) is headed by a *buapak*. The posts of lembaga and buapak are held by men but are transmitted matrilineally.

b) Each clan owns a specified amount of ancestral land, known legally as customary land (*tanah pusaka adat*), which is registered in the name of its female members and transmitted matrilineally through them. Male members have usufructory rights over such land.

c) The society observes rules of exogamy. However, what constitutes an exogamic unit could be a lineage or a clan, depending on the demographic size of the clan concerned.

d) Postmarital residence is matrilocal, with the husband moving into the wife's mother's place.

The Adat Perpatih social organization has its roots in an agricultural society initially dependent on subsistence farming, in which rice growing and the cultivation of orchards were of paramount importance. Thus the majority of the ancestral land, which in 1986 amounted to 34,565 acres for the whole of Negeri Sembilan, is padi land and areas earmarked for homesteads (*tanah kampung*), while a smaller area is in orchards, rubber plots and fish ponds (*tebat*). These land were first registered in the names of women, according to the Mukim Registers in Kuala Pilah, in the 1870s. Capitalist penetration with the coming of the British rule in the nineteenth century brought with it rubber growing. By the beginning of the twentieth century (around 1912), large tracts of land in the mukim were opened for rubber cultivation, and these land, in parcels of five acres or less, were initially registered in the names of men. Since then, two kinds of land ownership have prevailed in the district, with two separate patterns of inheritance. The ancestral (customary) land is transmitted according to Adat Perpatih Law, as explained earlier, while the rubber land registered as Malay reservation land[5] is transmitted according to the Islamic Law of inheritance, the Faraid, under which both men and women are entitled to inherit. Women therefore found themselves in a favourable position, having access to both categories of land.

After cultivation of rubber began, the Adat Perpatih society was engaged in a mixed economy dependent mainly on rice cultivation for subsistence and rubber tapping for cash. There were also other sources of cash income, such as animal husbandry on a very small scale, poultry keeping, and collection and sale of forest products, chief of which were cane and damar. Such an economy persisted until the 1960s, when agricultural activities in the mukim began to decline. In the 1970s, the decline was drastic, as manifested by large tracts of idle land (*tanah terbiar*) consisting of kampung land, rice fields and rubber plots. "*Tanah terbiar*" (lit. neglected land) is presently a very common feature in the mukim as well as in other Adat Perpatih areas of Rembau, Jelebu and Tampin. According to official statistics[6] at least 1,160 acres of agricultural land in Mukim Seri Menanti have been uncultivated for the last five to ten years. The writer will not elaborate on the reasons for the decline in village agricultural activities here, as this has been dealt with at length elsewhere.[7] Suffice it to say at this juncture that among the reasons normally put forward are migration to the city and to land development schemes, lack of development in the agricultural sector, and in the case of rice fields the indiscriminate felling of trees which caused the fields to silt.

5) Transfer and transmission of Malay reservation land is confined to Malays only. Such land therefore has a limited market.

6) Report by the Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung (Village Development Committees) for 1985, District Office, Kuala Pilah.

7) See, for example, proceedings of Seminar Kebangsaan Adat Perpatih and Wilayah Budaya Negeri Sembilan (3rd-5th May 1984, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor).

The last two decades or so have seen a number of changes in Adat Perpatih society; and some of these changes, the physical ones, are easily observable while others are not. It is to the less observable changes —those which affect social relations—that we now turn.

IV Women, Land and the Economy

As alluded to earlier, the practice of both customary and Islamic laws of inheritance enables women to inherit both types of land, i.e., customary as well as non-customary land. However, not every woman own both types of land. While all the respondents under study own adat land of varying sizes, or are expecting to inherit some from their mother, the same cannot be said of rubber land. As shall be explained subsequently, very few women own rubber land or any other types of non-customary land.[8)]

IV-i Customary Land (Tanah Pusaka Adat): Ownership and Size of Holdings

Membership of a matriclan guarantees a woman the right to a piece of land designated to her clan; the land could be registered under her name or one of her close matrikin. Restrictions on commoditization of adat land ensures this right. Such land cannot be sold or transferred to anyone outside the clan; even within the clan, transfers can only be executed between very close kin, starting with a minimal lineage. Such transfers are usually regarded as gifts (*pemberian*), although they invariably involve monetary payment on the part of the recipient to the "donor," and are done with the consent of the lineage and clan head, the buapak and lembaga. Thus, although adat law prohibits the sale of adat land, this does occur very infrequently. The closed market for such land ensures only a token price for it and provides little inducement for the owner to sell. However, this is not the only disincentive for a women to part with her adat land. Land is kept particularly for its symbolic value. Ownership of land is one of the many indices of prestige and status; one without land is seen as an object of pity, and anyone who parts with her *tanah pusaka adat* often faces strong public criticism. It is generally believed that those who sell customary land will incur the wrath of their ancestors (*disumpah nenek moyang*). Hence it is the duty of everyone to keep her plot of land within the family. Ownership of adat land is seen as proof of her link with the matrilineage and the matriclan, and defines her roots within the society. Such roots are also deemed important to the men of the lineage/clan. They establish men's right to hold adat office, of which there are many, and of which the post of undang i.e., the head of a luak (a territorial unit within the traditional Negeri Sembilan polity) is the most prestigious.[9)] Other posts

8) Other types of non-customary land may take the form of orchards (*dusun*) and, of late, land designated for housing in urban areas. This last affects those who were once migrants and lived in town areas. However, ownership of such land is regligible.

9) In terms of status within the present political hierarchy at the state level, the Undang is immediately below the Yang Dipertuan Besar, the head of state of Negeri Sembilan. There are four Undang, one each for the Luak of ↗

Table 1 Size of Land Holdings and Prospective Land Holdings

Size of Holdings (acres)	*Ricefields* No. of Owners	No. of Prospective Inheritors	*Kampung Land* No. of Owners	No. of Prospective Inheritors	*Rubber Holdings* No. of Owners	No. of Prospective Inheritors
1/8	2	—	1	—	—	—
1/6	—	2	1	2	—	—
1/5	—	—	2	—	—	—
1/4	10	18	18	26	1	—
1/3	9	1	10	—	4	—
1/2	32	30	27	27	4	2
3/4	—	2	6	3	—	—
1	23	19	23	22	18	4
1¼	—	1	2	—	3	—
1½	1	2	3	—	6	—
1¾	—	—	2	1	2	—
2	7	9	7	3	15	3
2¼	—	—	—	1	—	—
2½	—	—	—	—	1	1
2¾	—	—	—	—	—	—
3	2	1	2	1	12	2
3¼	—	—	—	—	—	—
3½	1	1	—	—	—	—
3¾	—	—	—	—	—	1
4	—	2	—	—	6	—
4½	—	—	—	—	2	—
5	1	—	2	—	4	2
6	—	—	—	—	3	—
7	—	—	—	—	2	—
8	—	—	—	—	—	1
Total	89(44.5%)	88(44%)	106(53%)	86(43%)	83(41.5%)	16(8%)
No Land	23(11.5%)		8(4%)		101(50.5%)	

include that of the lembaga and buapak, and numerous others with elaborate titles and which are very much sought for the prestige they confer to the incumbents and their families.[10]

However, it is not symbolic value alone that Adat land offers; such land also has economic value or potential economic value. It may not be of much worth in monetary terms now, but it offers a kind of security

↘ Rembau, Jelebu, Sungai Ujung and Johol. The position is held for life by a male member of specific clans within a particular Luak and is transmitted matrilineally. The incumbent enjoys a generous four-figure monthly allowance and other privileges such as a place of residence, official car, etc. paid for by the state.

10) These traditional titles are recognised by the state, but the office-bearers are only given a yearly stipend of a few hundred Malaysian dollars. Hence such posts are of little economic value. Nevertheless, when an adat post becomes vacant, competition for it is very stiff with much antagonism between the contending parties.

against times of dire hardship. Hence, few women want to part with their share of Adat land; only those with several pieces may part with one or two parcels, but not with all of them. So there is always some stock of land, especially land for homesteads and rice fields within a family, ensuring everyone of its members a piece of land or the right to use one.

In the villages under study, only 44.5 percent of the respondents have rice fields registered in their name, 44 percent expect to inherit some, while the rest claim their expected inheritance is too minute to be worth considering and thus pronounce themselves landless. Of those who have rice land, the size of their holdings varies between one eighth of an acre and five acres, with 67.6 percent having one acre or less. Among those who expect to inherit rice fields, 81.8 percent said they will get only between one sixth of an acre and one acre (Table 1).

The percentage of ownership for kampung land is higher than for rice fields, i.e., 53 percent. Four percent of the respondents, for similar reasons as in the case of *sawah* ownership, claim to be landless, while 43 percent expect to inherit in the future. Holdings are small, from one eighth of an acre to five acres, with 73.6 percent of those with kampung land having only one acre or less (see Table 1).

Only 21.5 percent own orchards (largely planted with durians, langsat, and mangosteen), which are from a quarter of an acre to one acre in size. Half of the orchards are not customary land but registered under Malay reservation. Two-point-five percent of the respondents own *tebat* (large fish ponds), which are between a quarter acre and half an acre in size, and all of which comes under customary land.

Compared with 1969 [Azizah Kassim 1969: 188-200], it is evident that the size of customary land holdings has declined. The smallest holding for both rice and kampung land was one quarter of an acre in 1969, now it is one eighth; and the largest holding then was seven acres and six acres for rice land and kampung land respectively, while now it is only five acres for both categories of land (see Table 1). This decline can only be accounted for by the increase in population while the total size of adat land has remained constant. In fact, according to official sources,[11] customary land has been subjected to acquisition by the state authorities for purposes of physical development, such as widening roads and road reserves, building community halls, mosques, suraus, etc. It can be concluded that the size of Adat land has shrunk slightly.

Members of Adat Perpatih society can increase the acreage of adat land by changing the status of non-adat land in their possession into customary land. However, none has shown interest in doing so. This has its roots in the ambivalent attitude of some towards the rule of inheritance in Adat Perpatih. While they appreciate the need to protect the interest of women by making them trustees of adat land, they are also concerned by the misconception of some women of their right to the land. There is a tendency among women now to

11) Interview with the Assistant District Land Administrator, Kuala Pilah.

treat adat land as their individual or private property rather than communal property [Azizah Kassim 1986: 1-8], and consequently they ignore the usufructory rights their male kin have on such land. In short, there is abuse of adat land to the disadvantage of its male members, causing some to be wary of adat laws of inheritance. Hence the refusal by some to increase the stock of customary land.

In addition there are some, especially men, who think adat law is contrary to Islamic law and call for its abolition. Such people, together with a few modern ones who believe in equality of the sexes and who want both their daughters and sons to inherit in equal proportion, are not interested in changing the status of their land (non-adat) into customary land. Hence the acreage of adat land remains constant, and with increase in members of the Adat Perpatih society, land holdings of individual members must decline in size.

Access to customary land is largely through inheritance, and transmission occurs some years after the owner's death. My study of land registration at the Kuala Pilah land office reveals that in most cases land is transmitted some five to ten years after the owner's demise. In a few cases in mukim Seri Menanti, transmission occurred twenty to thirty years after the owner's death, and in two cases transmission has never occurred, even though the owner died decades ago. This delay is attributable to two factors. First, it is considered bad taste even to discuss property division in the wake of the owner's death, when family members are expected to grieve over her loss. So several years are allowed to lapse; and it is only when sorrow over the death has clearly gone that family members get together to talk about land transmission. Secondly, when the time comes for land transmission, the inheritors are often dispersed geographically and it will take sometime to bring them together so that the necessary bureaucratic procedures can be carried out.

When there are more than one inheritor, the piece of land owned under a single title by the deceased is never physically sub-divided (*pecah batu*) into separate titles. Land holdings are small, in general less than five acres, making sub-division cumbersome, and cost of sub-division is prohibitively high by village economic standards. The cost of one sub-division is at least M$ 1,200, which is equivalent to six times the average monthly income of a rural household in Malaysia. Furthermore, the administrative procedures involved are often complicated and time-consuming, taking a year or two to complete. Given these circumstances and the existing regulation prohibiting sub-division of agricultural land into holdings of less than an acre, the villagers have little choice but to retain the old title; only the name of the late owner is cancelled and replaced by all her inheritors. This process is referred to as *alih nama* (change of name). The inheritors' names are listed, and after each name her share in the property is clearly indicated. It is only when there are few girls in the family and the deceased had several parcels of customary land with separate titles that multiple ownership is avoided. But such

cases are rare: only three among the writer's respondents. Multiple ownership is therefore quite widespread.

In cases where women expect to inherit land, the mother has often died (with her land awaiting transmission) or is already old. In such cases, it is the daughters who take over responsibility for their mother's land.

Multiple ownership, which reflects the minute land holdings of the villagers, is one of the main contributory factors inducing some of the villagers to migrate. Earlier, in the pre-independence period, it was not uncommon for people to migrate and open up new land elsewhere (*menebus* as it is referred to locally) or to seek employment with the government, especially in the armed forces. In the post-independence era, the destination of migrants is either land development schemes implemented by the government or urban areas.

Joint ownership also creates enormous problems for land management, maintenance and utilization. When there are many co-owners and some are no longer resident in the kampung, it is sometimes unclear who should pay the land taxes and maintain or work the land. Very often, those who are left behind are saddled with the land taxes; some pay them grudgingly, others do not. Evasion of land taxes, according to sources at the Kuala Pilah land office, is common, causing the land office to summon the various owners to pay up or be subject to a fine or confiscation of their land by the state.

Similarly it is the resident co-owners who are obliged to take care of the land. Many cannot do so because of old age,[12] others refuse because the land is not solely theirs. There is always the fear that once the land is put to economic use(e.g., turning kampung land to orchards) the co-owners may come to claim the produce. This is especially so when, at the time of transmission, no attempt is made by an elder (Lembaga or Buapak) to define to each owner the boundaries of their respective shares. However, when such boundaries are clearly defined, each owner quite often maintains and works only her share of the plot. Few problems arise unless the other co-owners are absent from the village. In this case, the absentee's portion will remain idle and may become overgrown with bushes, making it a haven for wild animals (especially wild boar), which in turn will damage crops in the village.

IV-ii Non-customary Land

Non-adat land takes various forms: rubber holdings, orchards and newly opened kampung land, which are usually Malay reservation areas; and, what is referred to locally as "*tanah geran putih*" (lit. white grant land), i.e., land with freehold titles without ownership restrictions. Of these, rubber smallholdings are the most popular, and their total size has slowly been increasing recently with the state's fringe alienation scheme. Land acquired under this scheme, known as "*tanah pinggir*," is invariably turned into rubber plots.[13]

12) Demographically, the majority of adults in the villages under study are above fifty years old.

13) In Mukim Seri Menanti, 541 acres had been alienated under the Tanah Pinggir scheme until 1988. Total number of lots is 166, each of which was allocated to one male owner.

As alluded to earlier, non-customary land is transmitted according to Islamic law of inheritance, which favours men, and as such it is not surprising that very little of such land is in women's hands. Among the respondents, only 20.5 percent inherited rubber land, with plots between a quarter of an acre and five acres in size, of which the majority are below two acres. Twenty-one percent claim to have bought rubber plots (between one and a quarter acres and seven acres). However, it is unclear if these plots are registered in their name. It is possible that the purchased rubber plots are in the husband's name; it is the practice in the villages under study for the husband to register newly bought land in his name rather than his wife's. Nonetheless, the newly acquired land, considered as *harta carian* (land acquired during the span of a marriage) is regarded by the wife (and the husband) as partly hers, for in the event of a divorce she is entitled to half of it.

While 8 percent of the respondents expect to inherit some rubber land, 50.5 percent neither own nor expect to inherit any.

Islamic patterns of land inheritance, unlike customary land inheritance, which confines transmission to women, accentuate fragmentation, with the result that most rubber lands are jointly owned by many. Evidence of such ownership abounds in the land registry at the Kuala Pilah District office. For parcels of land of five acres or less, the number of owners can vary from two to thirty with individual shares ranging from one half to one hundredth of an acre. However, in the villages under study, acute fragmentation seems to have been avoided. As shown in Table 1, in the majority of cases (53 percent) land holdings are between one and two acres. As commoditization of rubber land is allowed (though restricted to Malays only), small shareholders of a piece of rubber land will often sell off their shares. There are two ways by which such shares are disposed of: firstly, to one of the other co-owners if he can afford the price and is interested in buying; and secondly, in the event that none of the owners wants to keep the land or can afford to buy the others' shares, they might agree to look for a buyer, sell the land en bloc, and share the proceeds among themselves. The second method seems to be the most popular, and the writer has witnessed many dispose of their land this way. It appears that men are more prone to sell off their shares in a piece of inherited property. This tendency finds its roots in matrilocality, which takes men away to their wife's mother's place after marriage. As many family plots are sited in the vicinity of the natal village, a man, after marriage, finds it difficult to manage or work inherited land, especially if his wife's village is far off from his mother's. Thus many men are made landless and are dependent on their wife's property. The writer did not make a survey of land ownership by men, but discussions with many villagers reveal that a considerable number of men are landless. In Kg. Merual, for example, over 90 percent of the men have no land at all. Of late, a few have disposed of their land because they feel it to be more of a liability than an asset. Rubber land is no longer productive; in many cases the trees are old

and need replanting, and even if the trees are young, there is no labour in the village to work the plot. Even when income from the land is not forthcoming, land taxes must be paid at the beginning of each calender year. In this category, it is those without an heir who are most inclined to sell.

Life's exigencies also act as intervening circumstances compelling land owners finally to part with their land. For some, as shall be explained in Section IV-iii, village life is hard, and occasions often arise when money is urgently needed: to buy school uniforms and books for children at the beginning of the year, to pay for a daughter's wedding, to pay medical expenses, or to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, etc. Land is often sold to cope with such exigencies.

Fragmentation and commoditization of rubber land have had the combined effect of making some men landless and leaving 50.5 percent of the female respondents without such land. At the same time they lead to a concentration of rubber land in the hands of a few. Table 1 shows that 34.9 percent of rubber land owners have between three and seven acres. They also place rubber land in the hands of absentee villagers, who are in paid employment, especially in the urban areas.

Compared with seventeen years ago [Azizah Kassim 1970: 196-200], it is clear that the number of women with rubber smallholdings has decreased. In 1969, 27.1 percent of the sample had inherited rubber plots from their parents, while now the percentage has fallen to 20.5 percent. Similarly, the size of holdings has declined. Previously, the smallest rubber holding was half an acre, while the largest holdings was ten acres. Now the smallest holding is a quarter acre and the largest seven acres.

Besides rubber smallholdings, other types of non-adat land owned are negligible. There are, as mentioned in Section IV-i, some orchards owned by women which are under Malay reservation. There are also two parcels of freehold land of two and four acres owned by two households. Such land too is registered in the name of the male household head.

IV-iii The Village Economy

According to official statistics (1985),[14] the majority (52.9 percent) of household heads in Mukim Seri Menanti are above the age of fifty-five years. In the villages under study, the age structure of the household heads and their respective spouses seems to be of a similar pattern: 47 percent of both men and women are above fity-six years old, which is pensionable age in Malaysia. With a high number of elderly people in the villages, it is not surprising that only 52.5 percent of the household heads are economically active.

Economic activities take various forms: some are self-employed, others in paid employment. In the former category, the most common is rubber tapping and "farm work" (*kerja kampung*), which accounts for 30.5 percent of the households; petty trading, especially operating sundry shops (5.5 per-

14) Jadual-Jadual Banci Taraf Pertanian, Daerah Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, Jabatan Pertanian, May 1985.

Table 2 Sources of Household Income

Sources	No. of Households
Income from household head's work	47
Household head's work+Remittance	38
Household head's work+Pensions	12
Household head's work +Remittance+Pensions	8
Pensions+Remittance	34
Remittance	37
Pensions	19
Remittance+State welfare aid	3
Remittance+State welfare aid +Household head's work	1
State welfare aid	1
Total	200

cent); and house-building and carpentry (2 percent). In the latter category are a multitude of jobs in the private and public sectors: drivers, teachers, security officers, labourers, office and hospital attendants, salesmen, gardener, supervisors, waitors and army personnel. They work mainly in Pekan Seri Menanti, or in Kuala Pilah and Seremban town, commuting to the two towns daily.

It is significant that while 30.5 percent of the households are engaged in agriculture, only 14 percent are solely dependent on it for their livelihood. Besides rubber tapping, the agricultural activities are mainly vegetable gardening and poultry rearing (especially chickens), which are largely for home consumption. In addition, some are involved in the cultivation of fruit trees and animal husbandry (especially cows) for sale. Padi growing has been abandoned almost completely; in some villages for the last eleven years, in others since the 1980s.

Income from agricultural activities is difficult to assess. However the villagers' estimates show that such income varies from M$30 to M$150 a month. This range of income also applies to other jobs in the self-employed category.

Other sources of income include pensions and remittances from the urban areas. Thirty-six-point-five percent of household heads receive monthly pensions ranging from M$77 to M$700. They were in the public sector, working especially in the armed forces (police, army, navy, airforce) and as teachers; labourers with the Irrigation Department and with Malayan Railway; drivers with National Electricity Board; etc. Remittance, on the other hand, comes from close family members working in urban areas, especially from children (98 percent). The amount of remittance varies from M$20 to M$700 a month depending on the number of children in paid employment and the nature of their jobs. It is not uncommon to see parents receiving three or four remittances monthly.

Many households depend on more than one source of income: 19 percent, for example, depend on income of the household head from his current employment, as well as his pension from his previous employment; 17 percent on remittances (especially from children living in towns and cities) and pensions; 4 percent from household head's pension and his income from current employment in addition to remittances. A very small number, 2.5 percent, are dependent on state welfare aid. They are usually the elderly without children and living alone, or divorcees with young children. (Table 2).

Total household income varies between M$50 or less and M$2,200 a month. The

Table 3 Household Income

Monthly Income M$	No. of Households		Economic Level in Relation to Poverty Line
50	14		
51- 100	34		45% Poor
101- 200	42		
			Poverty Line
201- 300	30	86.5%	
301- 400	26		41.5% Above the poverty Line.
401- 500	27		
501- 600	8		
601- 700	5		
701- 800	4	9.5%	Rich
801- 900	1		
901-1,000	1		
1,001-1,100	1		
1,101-1,200	1		
1,201-1,300	1		
1,301-1,400	1		
1,401-1,500	1	4 %	Very Rich
1,501-1,600	1		
1,801-1,900	1		
2,101-2,200	1		

majority (86.5 percent) have M$500 or less. Those with a household income above M$ 1,000 are all salaried public service employees, especially teachers. In the household with the highest income, both husband and wife are secondary school teachers. Those in the middle income bracket, i.e., between M$501 and M$1,000 a month, are usually pensioners who have found alternative jobs, thus giving them two lucrative sources of income (Table 3).

The village economy, therefore, is no longer dominated by agricultural activities as it was in the late 1960s. It is more of a remittance economy now, dependent on income from urban occupations. How this changing economy affects male-female roles will be examined subsequently.

V Gender Relations in Adat Perpatih Society

Women's roles today have changed drastically from those of the 1960s. When the economy was dependent on rubber and rice production, men dominated the former and women the latter. Rice production and processing were seen as women's major task. Although men did expend some labour in the rice fields, they did so only when they were not engaged in rubber tapping or other forms of activities for cash. Hence there was a kind of duality in household economic activities, whereby women provided the staple, i.e., rice through sub-

sistence farming, and men cash income.[15] This staple (women) and cash (men) duality was also prevalent in the households where men were in paid employment. In a few cases where women and their children were left in the village, they were involved in rice production while their husbands lived elsewhere, sending cash home regularly and returning home only from time to time.

Thus, within the then peasant economy, women were contributing significantly to household income. There was, between men and women, a kind of economic complimentarity, which according to some old women was the basis for a sound and lasting marriage. Husband and wife were on a somewhat equal footing despite the prevalence of Islamic ideology, which emphasises male superiority. The equal standing of the spouses, at least in economic sphere, is made explicit in the society's traditional term for spouses, *kawan* (lit. friend), which was widely used up to the 1960s. Hence women's important economic function, coupled with their control over rice fields and kampung land, as well as matrilocality, gave them an advantage over their husbands. These are factors accounting for their "relative autonomy" (to borrow Stivens' term [1985]). Men's position then can be considered to have been precarious; the longer the marriage was, the longer they were removed from their natal village and matrilineage, and the more precarious their position was.

Now agriculture has ceased to be of much relevance to the village economy. Women no longer toil in the rice fields, nor are they involved in much agricultural avtivity. The majority of the respondents (90 percent) defined their occupation as *suri rumah* (lit. housewife), while a small number (8 percent) gave their occupation as housewife and rubber tapper or housewife and petty trader. It is the women in the latter category who are economically active. However, the nature of their job is supplementary to their husband's: invariably they work as "unpaid labour" in the family's economic enterprise such as rubber tapping and retail trading. For the majority, their role is confined to household chores: housekeeping, cooking, washing, and most important of all, taking care of the young, some of whom are their grandchildren left with them by parents working in the urban areas.[16] In more than 10 percent of the households, grandmothers are entrusted with the care of such children, some of school age, others younger. Hence some women are house bound and take minimal part in whatever little agricultural activities remain. Only a few do vegetable farming and rear poultry; much of this work is now done by men, who have little else to do, having a guaranteed monthly income from pensions and remittances. There is also a trend

15) This differentiation in male-female roles is also observed by M. G. Swift [1965: 37], D. K. Lewis [1962: 257-258] and M. G. Peletz [1981: 22-23].

16) There is an acute shortage of domestic help and childcare centres in the urban areas. Working mothers engaged in low-income jobs often leave their young children with relatives, especially their parents in the countryside. The writer found this phenomenon very common among the squatters she studied in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.

among men to keep their women (wife, daughters, sisters) away from agricultural work, which is seen as demeaning and a symbol of low status.

Economically, village women (unless they are themselves wage-earners) can be said to be marginalized, and this marginalization process is further enhanced when children's remittances are channeled through the father. Women now control few economic resources (especially cash), contribute less to the household economy and thus are dependent economically on their husbands. This dependence, in the case of wives of pensioners, continues even after the husband's death, when the widow is entitled to receive part of the husband's pension. The wife's dependency on the husband affects the balance of power between them. Women, as Stivens observes in the case of Rembau, have lost some of their relative autonomy [Stivens 1985: 42]. The balance of power has now swung in favour of the men, and their position in their wives' matrilineage has become entrenched. Savings made by the husband while in paid employment and from children's remittances are used to build, rebuild, or repair the family house sited on the wife's land, to purchase consumer goods to boost the family's prestige, and to maintain that prestige. The higher the standard of living the husband can maintain, the more the wife is dependent on him.

There is also a change in the way future brides are assessed. The family of a prospective husband no longer relates a girl's worth to her family's land ownership, as was the practice in the 1960s and earlier. What now seems to be of relevance is her achievements in education and in the job market, besides her industry, looks, deportment and the general consensus about her conduct. In a future husband too, it is his educational attainment that is closely related to economic worth, which is stressed so much that, in some marriages, one of the questions asked of him is whether he is "a graduate." His other qualities or handicaps are often ignored.

With the increasing importance of paid employment in the village economy, agricultural underdevelopment and the decline in economic value of ancestral land, it is interesting to note the society's changing attitude towards children. Previously, female children were highly prized, not only to ensure the perpetuity of the lineage group and with it the ancestral land, but also as somebody to care for and comfort parents in their old age. Now there seems to be a shift towards gender egalitarianism. Couples without daughters no longer seek a female child for adoption, and male children are also sometimes adopted. With the high rate of migration involving both men and women, having a daughter no longer guarantees the welfare of the parents in old age; and with ancestral land acutely fragmented and economically worthless, offsprings' sex is of no consequence. In fact, there are some who believe that having sons may be better. Sons are believed to have better chances to enter the job market and hence be in a good position to support parents financially, while girls may get married to a non-local and be taken away by their husband.

Outside the boundary of the immediate family, relations between a woman and her matrikins are somewhat distant. Among the occassions which brought the matrikins of a matrilineage together were agricultural activities through mutual-help institutions known locally as *gotong-royong* or *tolong-tolongan* [Azizah Kassim 1970: 220-224], especially in rice production (padi replanting and harvesting) and rice processing (padi drying, winnowing and pounding). Now that rice is no longer grown and is usually bought, few occassions arise to bring people together. Previously, life's hardships imposed by the uncertainties of a peasant economy also induced villagers to come together to form such voluntary socio-economic organizations as the "*syarikat*" (lit. company), whereby cash was pooled to buy goods such as tents, water drums, crockery, cooking utensils, etc., for common use during *kenduri* (feasts). Syarikat are no longer formed, while those formed in the 1950s and 1960s no longer function. With assured monthly income from pensions and remittances, most people feel less need for this form of communal organization. Individualization is taking place among the villagers, which is further accentuated by the introduction of basic amenities and consumer goods. The supply of piped water to individual houses makes water holes (*perigi*), the meeting place of village women, redundant; televisions keep people at home for most of the time, giving them little time for communal activities; and access to gas and kerosene cookers deny women and men some of the co-operative efforts involved in gathering firewood.

Adat land may have little economic value now, but its future economic potential and symbolic value are not dismissed. Multiple ownership indicates land scarcity, hence many Adat Perpatih women hold on to their land passionately even if they do not maintain or work it. Some, due to ignorance of Adat Perpatih land regulations/laws, tend to regard the land as private property, ignoring the usufructory rights of their male kin. This quite often leads to dissension between siblings and close matrikin (cousins, for example) of the opposite sex. Sometimes a kind of distrust exists between them, inducing many men now to insist that their names be registered in land titles as usufructory co-owners. Nonetheless, at the extra-household level male-female relationships with respect to land are influenced by various factors, especially men's economic position. When they have a relatively steady income, adat land becomes irrelevant. It is when they are farmers and dependent solely on agriculture for their livelihood that such small parcels of land matter.

In conclusion, it can be said that the village economy is no longer a peasant economy but is based on remittances and pensions. This economic shift, which took place in the last one and a half decades, has reduced the importance of adat land and had a marked effect on social relationships in the village, especially male-female relationships, where the balance of power is now weighted in favour of the males.

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